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Grieving for our Environmental/Social Losses

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Abba Eban observed: "History teaches us that men [people] and nations behave wisely once they have exhausted all other alternatives." The question is: Are we ready for the hard choices?

Choice is the essence of sustainable community development. Yet there is an increasing number of vested interests, such as residential developers, who want to get emotions out of land-use decisions. They argue that it's not fair to developers when those people living in the area of a proposed housing subdivision keep delaying construction with legal appeals, despite the fact that the proposed developments meet legal requirements - the letter of the law. They contend that the approval process of public comment, which includes the right of appeal if the public feels it is needed, costs developers too much money.

The effect of such thinking: (1) steals choice and self-determining government from the people who live in the area of the proposed development, (2) gives preference to residential developers, an increasing number of which seem to be absentee, even from out-of-state, (3) forces local people to accept absentee interests, (4) limits and undermines the scope of a local community's potential vision for sustainable development within the context of its own landscape, especially for a desired future condition, and (5) curtails or even eliminates the ability of local people to actively mourn for the continuing loss of their quality of life and their sense of place as outside choices are forced upon them, often by people who will not have to live with the consequences of the imposed actions.

Emotions, the force behind relationships, are based on personal and collective values - the heart and soul of community. Public debate, and the emotions it evokes, not only help participants integrate the proposed changes into their consciousness but also are a necessary and vital form of grieving over the imminent loss of a safe and known past and the invasion of an unknown and uncertain future.

After all, the local people and their children must reap the consequences of any decisions that are made. To limit their choices is to force someone else's consequences upon them, often at a great and increasingly negative long-term cost, first environmentally and then socially.

When, for example, preferential treatment is given to residential developers, including absentee developers, local people are at a decided disadvantage when it comes to planning for long-term community sustainability within the context of a finite landscape. While the focus of sustainable community development is long-term, the interests of residential developers is strictly short term, which

usually counteracts long-term planning based on long-term environmental consequences. Further, it is exceedingly unlikely that absentee residential developers are going to have a vested interest in the long-term welfare of the community once they have made their money.

As noted above, it is the letter of the law that the residential developers want strictly enforced. But the letter of the law allows no sensitivity to either local conditions or extenuating circumstances, both of which may have consequences that are critical to the long-term environmental sustainability of a community. So, long after the residential developer is gone, the community is left to deal with the environmental errors caused by too much haste because the letter of the law was held to be inviolate and shielded from challenge.

Eliminate public debate (which steals people's legal right to express how they feel) and trust and emotional health wither like a leaf in a hot wind. To be healthy, people not only must be allowed to grieve but also must be given permission to grieve for their perceived losses - a vital purpose of public debate.

Debates over the use of a given piece of land are certainly fuelled by personal values that are expressed as emotions. Grief, although difficult at best, is critical to the emotional acceptance of a painful circumstance and to the reshaping of oneself in relationship to an outer world that reflects a new reality based on that circumstance. Rational long-term planning for sustainable community development is therefore possible only when people have moved through their grief.

Initially, however, we resist change because we are committed to protecting our existing values, representing as they do the safety of past knowledge in which there are no unwelcome surprises. We try to take our safe past and project it into an unknown future by skipping the present, which represents change and holds uncertainty, danger, and grief. But mourning for ecological losses or even for a small, private, spiritual sanctuary, say a wooded hill near one's home, has a path that is neither simple nor predictable.

Those of us who have been trained to deal primarily through our intellect, which is but the first step in grasping the loss of someone or something we love, are too often cut off from our feelings and therefore try, as best we can, to minimize the pain. On the other hand, those who are in touch with their feelings and acutely aware of their pain are quickly accused by the monied interests, such as residential developers, of caring more for a wooded hill, wild flowers, or a butterfly than for people. It is no surprise, therefore, that both our internal and external worlds often make grieving for the loss of our environment and our attachments to it a most difficult and uncertain process, where the need to defend personal values and the feelings they engender against cold materialism is all but a foregone conclusion.

We have almost no social support for expressing grief. Honest conversations

about grief, which come quite naturally at a bedside of a dying loved one, are far more difficult and dangerous at a conference table, where the issue is land use development and someone's profit margin.

Nevertheless, we deem ourselves a democratic society, one that is open to the debate of any and all issues in a public forum. And it is here, in public debate, that one must be allowed to express emotions and grief.

People have long used rituals to help themselves and one another mourn and recover from grief. Funerals and memorial services serve as a rite of passage between the initial shock of loss and the longer, more private and difficult phases of grieving. Most of our customs of contemporary mourning are directed at the acute loss of people and pets during the first weeks and months of the grieving process. But environmental and social losses are intermittent, chronic, cumulative, and without obvious beginnings and endings.

It is therefore necessary to encourage, support, and development - not curtail - safe customs of grieving for environmental and social losses, those which alter the context of our lives just as surely as the loss of a person or pet. One of the best ways to encourage and develop a safe venue in which to grieve for our environmental and social losses (so that we may plan wisely for sustainable community development in the present for the present and the future) is to improve support for and the quality of existing public debate.

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